

A terrible disease came to this country. The illness was called the Red Death. No one was safe. Soon many people were sick. There was no help - no cure. The Red Death killed half of the people in this land.

Prince Prospero - the ruler of this country - wanted to escape from the terrible disease. He called all his courtiers to his castle on the top of a hill. When all of the most powerful people in the land were inside the castle, the gates and doors were closed. They were fastened and no one could get in or out.

Prince Prospero had plenty of food inside the castle. And there was plenty of wine to drink. He did not think about the rest of the people in his land. Prince Prospero told his courtiers to enjoy themselves.

"Forget about the Red Death," he said. "The disease is outside the castle walls. I don't want to think about the Red Death. I don't want to hear about the Red Death. I don't want to see the Red Death. I want everyone to be happy!"

The prince prepared a masque for his courtiers. There was going to be music for dancing. There was going to be wonderful food to eat. There was going to be good wine to drink. Dancers and singers were going to entertain the guests. Everyone was going to wear masks. Their faces were going to be hidden by the masks.

There were seven special rooms in the castle. Each room was a different color. And each room had a great window in one of its walls. The glass in each of these windows was a different color. At night, a fire burned

outside each window. The light of the flames shone through the windows and the rooms were lit with colored light.

These rooms were together in a line. The prince and his courtiers went from one room to the next room. They sang and danced. They laughed. They ate and drank.

The first room was blue - the color of the sky. The chairs and the carpet were blue. The furniture was blue. The glass in the window was blue.

The second room was purple - the color of dark wine. The chairs and couches were covered with purple cloth. The window glass was purple.

The third room was green - the color of leaves. It had green glass in its window.

The fourth room was orange - the color of the sun at sunset. The fifth room was as white as snow. The sixth room was violet - the color at the edge of a rainbow.

The seventh and last room was black - as black as night. Black curtains hung on the walls. The carpets on the floor were black.

But the window in this room was red - the color of blood. The light that came through the window was the color of blood.

There was also a clock in the seventh room. It was a large old clock. Its pendulum swung backward and forward slowly. A bell in the clock rang every hour. The metal bell made a low noise. Everyone in the castle heard the bell. Every hour, they stopped and listened to the clock.

When the bell rang, the musicians stopped playing music. The dancers stopped dancing. The courtiers stopped eating and drinking. The faces of the men and women became pale. They held their hands in front of their eyes. When they heard the clock, they became afraid. When the clock was silent, they took their hands from their faces and they laughed. Then the musicians started playing again. The dancers danced. Everyone ate and drank. They forgot about the clock until the next hour.

Prince Prospero was pleased. This was his finest masque. He thought of nothing but the masque. The courtiers enjoyed themselves. Their only thoughts were about the food, drink, music and dancing.

The masque had started in the afternoon. The courtiers did not worry about the clock at first. The bell rang once. It rang twice. It rang three times. The courtiers stopped for only a few moments as the bell rang. Then the masque continued.

The guests walked from room to room. When night came, fires were lit behind the great windows. Light shone through the glass. The light was the color of each of the windows - blue, purple, green, orange, white and violet.

But one room was empty. No one wanted to enter the seventh room. This room had red light coming through its window. And it had the great clock.

The bell of the clock rang ten times. Everyone stopped. Then they ate, danced and drank again. Eleven o'clock came. The courtiers stopped for a longer time. But soon they were enjoying themselves once more. Finally, the bell rang twelve

times. The courtiers stopped and waited. They all listened as the bell rang twelve times. Midnight.

Suddenly they saw a stranger. No one had seen this stranger's mask before. Who was this person? No one could enter or leave the castle. How had the stranger entered?

The stranger wore a long white gown. He wore the clothes of a dead man in a tomb. His mask was terrible and frightening. He had the face of a dead man. There was blood on the mask. And there was blood on the stranger's clothes.

Prince Prospero was not pleased. He did not want to remember the Red Death. Who had come wearing a mask that reminded them of the Red Death?

"Take him!" shouted the prince. "Kill him!"

Several men moved toward the stranger. The stranger looked at the men. They stopped walking. Was there a mask on the stranger's face? Or was the sign of disease on the stranger's face? The men were afraid.

"Take him!" shouted the prince again. "Kill him!"

But no one touched the stranger. Everyone moved away from him. The prince was angry.

The stranger walked from the blue room into the purple room. Everyone moved away from the stranger with the mask of the Red Death. Everyone was afraid.

Prince Prospero followed the stranger from the blue room to the purple room. He followed him from the green room to the orange room. He followed the stranger from the white room to the violet room.

There was only one more room. The stranger stood in the black room. He stood in front of the great clock. The hands of the clock had stopped at midnight. The bell was never going to ring again. The red light from the window fell on the stranger and the clock. The red light was the color of blood.

Prince Prospero pulled a knife from his belt. He went into the black room. He was going to kill the stranger.

The red light fell on the stranger, and he turned toward Prince Prospero. The stranger was not wearing a mask!

Prince Prospero cried out in pain. The knife fell from his hand. The prince fell onto the ground in front of the clock. He was dead.

Then every one of the courtiers fell onto the floor. Their bodies shook. Blood came from their ears, their eyes and their noses. The floor became red with blood. They cried in fear as they died.

Prince Prospero no longer ruled in the castle. The castle had a new master. Red Death was the ruler now.